

A Nice Life

April 15, 1981 was my first day in Maine. I came over the Kittery bridge into the cool, grey atmosphere that I know now is the usual state of affairs here.

Other immigrants will understand the impact that green sign "Welcome To Maine" has for the first time. It is a shock, almost a provocation to Maine to someone from away - and I mean way away - is not just a different place, it is more like a different set of possibilities and assumptions. Things that are lost or forgotten or replaced elsewhere still matter here.

To jump ahead twenty days to my first visit to a backwoods farm in Industry, Maine (which as you may not assume, has no industry), I remember pulling into a little dooryard area next to a very little cabin with a tarpaper roof and rough boards for siding. Above it, spreading up the hill were an apple orchard, some pears and some plums, all in various stages of pink, bloom and petal fall. The grass was that bold spring green that is so bright you think "Yes, that's green".

The terraced garden beds that drew your eye up to the big barn under construction were littered with evidence of spring work - wheelbarrows, handcarts, shovels and hoes, piles of compost and newly dug stones.

This scene was so uncommon to my New York eye that I not only had nothing to compare it to as a landscape or a workplace, I had no way to even think about it. All my mind could see was stuff, lots of it and nobody around - no one tending it - none of it locked up, guarded or gated. My first, strongest, and most clearly recalled reaction was "Oh my God! Someone is going to rip this all off!"

The whole scene, from the grass to the wheelbarrow to the plum blossoms looked as vulnerable to looting as an untended handbag on the subway.

Moments later the owner appeared. Almost simultaneous with the arrival on the scene of the big bearded man who owned the place was the arrival of a customer bearing half a dozen broken garden tools seeking the service of the first mans tool handle business.

What transpired between them was a conversation and a bit of commerce unlike any I'd ever seen or even heard about.

"Well, I been through the shed and gathered these and figured I'd better go ahead and get them all fixed"

"Hmm, well, yes."

"You're still making handles then?"

"Not now really, but I guess I am, yeah I guess I will."

"There's no hurry of course - I just thought I'd drop them off"

"Hmm, yes."

"Well, good enough then. Well, I suppose..."

(This I later learned means he's leaving)

"I'll get them. I have some handle blanks around."

"Good enough."

"It probably won't be until snow flies."

"Fine, fine, thanks alot"

"Bye."

There were a number of amazing things about this conversation and transaction besides the humility and grace of both parties. One is that there was absolutely no discussion of money. None. The other is that even in Maine it is at least six months from May until snow!

It was partly this sense of Maine as so different not in degree but in type and partly the steady freezing rain that had me disoriented, brooding and sleepless in my leaking tent in an empty campground in North Alfred that first night.

The owners of the place, which really didn't open till mid May had left for two days shortly after my arrival. They didn't want any money from me, regarding my situation with both puzzlement and pity. I thought one had to stay in a campgrounds - I assumed it would be illegal to sleep in a tent anywhere else. I also thought it was spring.

"It's spring in New York" I told the campground owner as we stood in driving mixed precipitation at 32 degrees. He peered out from under his yellow rain hood and said, "It's spring here too."

That night I slept maybe twenty minutes of every hour till about 2 am. Finally soaked and shivering I gave up and got in my car and

drove out to find heat. I drove and drove, expecting the familiar glow of an all night diner around the next dark turn in the road.

Well, maybe there was someplace closer, but I wound up in the Dunkin Donuts in Rockland grateful for the hot tea, a donut and a cheerful waitress at 4 am.

Cold, disoriented and bleery I sat there observing discretely my fellow pre dawn customers. The bi U shaped counter made it easy to follow the conversation between two men just across from me.

One was an older man who had a blue company uniform jacket on, white hair and one hearing aid on the side facing his much younger breakfast companion. The younger man had the same blue company jacket, a very upright seated posture and a face that was so eager and clean shaven it seemed so very young to me. Even then.

The older man was briefing the younger man on the details of the delivery route he was to be training him to take over. He mentioned the names of stores I'd never been in and towns I'd never heard of. He talked about traffic and supervisors. He mentioned snow and ice and then in a different, more serious tone "black ice".

All the time the young man listened, carefully. He looked straight ahead but listened - bobbing his head in time to the advice like a relief pitcher taking coaching on the mound. Then it was over.

They sat in silence for a while, both staring straight ahead now. They seemed quiet, almost relieved, ready.

The older man pushed his coffee cup away as a signal it was time to go. "Yes" he said, as if he were continuing from a point "It's a nice life" ... silence "If you can stand it."

Fifteen years hence and I can still feel like that young man - head up, listening, respectful - ready. I know that they should have a subtext on that sign just over the bridge - "MAINE - It's a nice life"...